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Career issues, paths and motivations: Career stories of four UK academics

Dr Maria Mouratidou

Abstract

Using narratives from four academics in the UK, this chapter offers an understanding of the career paths and motivations of academics from a range of sectors. It uses in-depth interview data to construct a narrative that demonstrates how the academics morphed their professional role over time, illuminating the complexity of career decisions in academic careers. The aim of this study was not to generalise; rather, the intention was to explore four participants' careers in depth, and thereby to share real-life stories. This chapter answers a call for research into different academic contexts and deepens our understanding of academic career motivations and issues in the UK. This issue is highly topical, and therefore this chapter makes an important contribution to the debate in this area.

Keywords: Careers, narratives, academia

Introduction

This chapter responds to calls of scholars for more research into academic careers in different contexts (Baruch and Hall, 2004; Bosanquet et al., 2017; Edmunds et al., 2016; Kwiek and Antonowicz, 2015). This area is highly topical (see for instance Altman et al., 2018) and, therefore, this chapter is both significant and important. It narrates the careers of four UK academics by sharing their career experiences, inspired by the approach of Czarniawska and Sevón (2005). The aim is to gain an insight into the intricacy of career issues by painting a picture of their experiences and placing an emphasis on the individual nature of careers referring to modern career theory concepts, such as the protean, intelligent and kaleidoscope career, from within the ecosystem of academia (Baruch, 2013). These concepts emerged inductively from the participants' stories. The chapter reveals that academic careers are characterised by transitions based on life circumstances where academics have the ability of morphing their professional lives depending on needs and situations operating in a boundaryless world (Baruch, 2013; Hall, 2004). Before embarking on the narratives, however, it is first necessary to briefly explain the key concepts and terminology that will be referred to throughout this chapter.

The **boundaryless** career encourages mobility and flexibility. The careerist takes responsibility for their career, by changing roles, employers and even occupations (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). The **protean** career concept (Hall, 2004) explores the capability of transformation or morphing oneself in one's career, in order to accommodate one's values. This study demonstrates how participants transformed their careers depending on their own situations. The **kaleidoscope** career explores three parameters that reflect an individual's needs for challenge, career advancement, and self-worth compared against a person's need for balance, intersected by the person's need to say 'what about myself? How can I be true to myself?' and it therefore refers to authenticity (Mainiero and Sullivan 2006). The **intelligent** career invites the career actor to consider the following basic questions that will reveal motivations, skills, abilities and relationships: why do you work? who do you work with? how do you work? (Arthur et al., 2017).

The next section outlines the approach adopted for this study, and this is followed by the four narratives – summarised career histories that include important happenings and decisions. This leads into an exploration of the common career-concept patterns that emerge from the narratives. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the implications for academic careers, limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

Methods

The chapter presents the preliminary findings of an inductive hermeneutic study of UK academics' career experiences by utilising life-story interviews. Such interviews explore individuals' interpretations of their lives, their daily experiences, and issues they had to deal with. They are beneficial for understanding important events which have made an impact on a person's life (Thomson et al., 2002). Participants consisted of three men and one woman and were aged between 40 and 52 at the time of the study, with differing marital statuses (married n=2; divorced n=1; single n=1). They all worked at different North West Universities in England within various disciplines such as: natural sciences, sport science, film and media studies and performing arts and their working experience in academia ranged from five to fifteen years. The selection criterion was that subjects were permanent academics in a UK university. The participants' profiles are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Respondents were approached through existing contacts, and hence represent a convenience sample (Patton, 2002). It is common in studies of this type to study a small number of participants in great detail, in order to delve deeply into their experiences and provide a richness of data, since narratives help us better understand human phenomena and existence and provide meaning (Polkinghorne, 1988). Hence, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and lasted from 45 minutes to almost two hours. Data were analysed using narrative techniques by configuring the data into a coherent whole (Polkinghorne, 1995). Stories were created by integrating events and happenings into a holistic narrative that contained a narrative thread, called ‘the plot’. This allowed the researcher to capture the richness and nuances of meaning in the human actions, and to reveal common themes, identify underlying patterns between the themes (Polkinghorne, 1995).

In the following section, participants’ stories are told using extracts from interview transcripts. These are interpreted hermeneutically, and key patterns that emerge are outlined to give a sense of the career issues affecting UK academics.

John (early 50s, Senior Lecturer, natural sciences, married)

John’s interest in an academic career started after graduating from his Bachelor’s studies. He wanted to study for a PhD, because he discovered a love for research via his university studies. Indeed, research became his passion. He could not get a PhD position immediately, and instead he enlisted in the military. During that time, he became aware of bureaucracy. This was a pivotal point in this life and career. As he said:

I realised that if I would continue doing bureaucratic work for life, I would die. This made me realise what I wanted to do. Research, where action happens (...) I wanted a job that I loved (...) Two months after I had finished my service in the military I was walking on the street and I bumped into an old friend of mine from university. We talked, and he told me that he was doing his PhD.

The following day I went to the lab to meet my friend's supervisor. We spoke, and he asked me what I wanted to do and why I wanted to do the PhD. He told me that if I wanted to, I could start. I registered at the University of XY in the department of medical science and started in March. The encounter with my friend happened in January. I finished the PhD and looked for a post doc. I knew that I had to be in the lab, to do research. I found a post doc in Northern England. My supervisor knew the professor responsible for post docs in Northern England, who is still my current boss. We met at a conference in Spain...we spoke about the job and I got it. I worked hard, I wanted to impress, I guess.

I made a discovery in the lab the same year (...) We wrote a paper together and I got my contract extended for another year. When that contract was about to finish, I applied for a job as a researcher in the Netherlands, because the research in my field was thriving there. I was offered the job. Immediately, I told my current boss about it, and he said that he would double their offer if I remained with him. So, I did. I got more money and stayed. I jumped 3 paygrades. But, money wasn't the only factor. I had been in this city for almost two years, had made friends, I had met my wife. I basically said, 'the job is great, the money is great, and so I will stay'.

The job in Northern England did not only include money and benefits but also gave me a challenge. I was involved in a large project about cancer research. The cancer project helped me to develop at work too. I was 30 years old and junior project leader. I sat in meetings with the big names in my field. I sat at the same table with researchers from Harvard. People were interested in my opinion. My job made an impact. I helped to develop policy. I felt valued because my opinions mattered. I understood then that my work was important and had a purpose.

John accredits his career development within academia to serendipity initially; by being in the right place at the right time. Indeed, happenstance theory stresses the importance of an unintended event, which can lead to career change (Krumboltz, 1998). John's choice to remain where in his current position was not only based on pursuing his career: it was also the result of his wider life picture and his thoughts upon his quality of life (Hall, 2004). He emphasised the friends he had made, and the encounter with his future wife. This is therefore an example of the *protean* career, because he made career choices looking for self-fulfilment.

John's career progressed quickly when he decided to stay in the UK, aided by structural forces such as jumping three paygrades and moving up the ladder. However, his transition into academia was influenced by the fact that he had become a father in 2003 and balancing his life, as well as securing a permanent contract, became important values (Baruch and Hall, 2004; Direnzo et al, 2015). John explains:

During that period, working as a researcher, I travelled a lot, I wrote many important papers, I met decision makers, I lived the dream. The only negative was that I did not have a permanent contract. I had a fixed-term contract that was renewed every three years. In 2004, I was offered a ten-year contract as researcher. Although this was a great life, I realised that I was starting to grow old and I already had a family. This made me realise that it was time to have security (...) permanency (...) a contract without an end date.

John believes that a permanent contract was an important reason to enter academia. According to the protean career concept, people act as "*agents of their own career destinies*" (Inkson and Baruch, 2008, p. 217). John, at that time in his life, was driven by his need to attain employment safety in order to provide a safe income to his family. Hence, he applied for, and got, a permanent academic position.

John stresses the value of a permanent contract, saying:

in order to satisfy employment safety, I had to move into lectureship. This was the only motivation. I gained a permanent contract, but I lost my 'freedom'.

John strives for authenticity and having a meaningful career based on his values, by being loyal to his dream. However, he also struggles to find the equilibrium between his authentic self and the nature of his academic work, which includes administrative work, teaching, and many hours of student support (Toutkoushian and Bellas, 1999; Ibarra, 2015) leading to work overload (Bothwell, 2018).

John explains:

All these years, I seriously underestimated the level of over-working. Until I was 40 years old, I was working overtime every day. I worked for more hours than I should. I thought that I was tireless. The last 10 years...I feel tired. Today after an intense day, around 3 pm I am tired. My mind is not working properly. I am not balanced. Currently I am trying to hold a balance. I mean the system has not collapsed yet, but I am seriously overworked (...) as soon as I open the laptop I have 30 emails waiting for my reply. This takes time.

John has followed the Alpha career pattern. His focus was initially on challenge and authenticity but now the focus is leaning toward balance, since he feels overworked due to the multiple roles that he is juggling with (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006).

Adam (early 40s, Associate Professor, sports sciences, married)

Adam works as associate professor in sports science and followed his career dream, with traits of a protean careerist in his narrative (Hall, 2004):

Since high school, I knew that I would become an academic. I remember saying to my grandmother that I wanted to work as an academic. I think that a TV show which was about a university inspired me. I saw the TV characters and I think this influenced me. Even today, twenty years after graduating from university, I still have all the assignments, assessment criteria and handbooks from every unit I took. I kept them because I knew that I could use them in the future for my own units.

Adam finished his bachelor and masters in sports science and moved straight into academia. He decided to apply for a permanent position as a lecturer for two equally important reasons:

When I was in Manchester, while I was teaching, as a part-time lecturer, I applied for a funded PhD, which I unfortunately I did not get. This meant that I had to consider how to support myself. I needed a job to provide for me financially and a job that would allow me to do something that I loved. I needed an academic position. I wanted employment safety, but I only ever looked at academia. I never applied for anything else. Academia was the dream job.

Adam proactively planned his career, by applying for PhD programs and jobs only within academia following his career needs and values (Hall, 2004; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). Since the start of his career, he has progressed to Associate Professor. He attends all the leadership meetings in his University and is responsible for the research in his department. He is currently following a traditional hierarchical career after having morphed his career path. He initially pursued a boundaryless career, changing employers to discover his dream job (Baruch, 2004; Baruch and Hall, 2004). He continues by saying:

I hope to be full professor in five years' time. That is the plan. Work is very important to me – it is my ego. I identify with my work. So, for me there is no 9-5 or weekend. Work needs to be done. When you are doing research, I think you have more balance, because you decide how far and much you want to push yourself, and if you feel swamped by work, you can take a break and come back to it later. This can't happen when the university demands office hours for students and open days and handholding. For me, this is the difference. Having to do plenty of boring and unnecessary things such as those that I mentioned is exhausting. I don't mind working a whole night doing research. That is fun, it does not exhaust me.

Adam clearly identifies with work (Ibarra, 2002). Hence, for him, work is more important than having work-life balance because “*work needs to finish*” (see also Baruch, 2011). This can be paralleled with the Alpha career pattern, where men look for challenge and authenticity in their careers, and at the end of their careers consider balance. Spousal support in childcare responsibilities has been a vital aid in Adam's career progress as his wife takes care of the family, while he is devoted to his career (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). Adam's story supports previous findings of UK universities (e.g. Knights and Richards, 2003) which suggests that careers are based upon a masculine model; namely research activity, long working hours and participation in the Research Excellence Framework. However, Adam also talks about work overload, and although he admits that he is “*not balanced now*”, he refers to administrative tasks that he needs to complete and “*needy*” students taking up most of his time, instead of his research, which is his main interest (Bothwell, 2018).

Martin (late 40s, lecturer in film studies and arts, married)

Martin was raised in a small rural town. He describes how he became an academic:

I wasn't a great pupil in school, but I loved films and wanted desperately to study cinema. I liked to watch films. I dreamt of being a filmmaker. The university course that I enrolled on was called 'film studies', but it included some practice too. When I finished my degree, I looked for jobs, but the town where I was living didn't provide career opportunities within film and cinema. I moved around the world and worked in different projects. I did various jobs within film and the media. After six years of experience, I was starting to wonder when I would direct a film for the cinema. I remember thinking, 'is this not OK? I'm fine; I'm making money, doing what I want. It may not be the best, i.e. making great movies, but I'm OK. I'm deciding for myself, deciding my projects'. I was able to control everything and had the freedom to do whatever I wanted. I started to make a good name, and my work had great publicity. All my projects were based on challenge. I wanted the challenge and to learn from it. However, because I was not from a well-known family, I've only had limited-budget projects. Yet, they do have their challenge, because everything you want to create is based on the financial aspect. How much money will this cost and how much do I have?

Martin, too, exhibited traits of the protean career. He morphed his career according to his values, made his own career decisions, and worked on projects that he enjoyed while pursuing a boundaryless career. He clearly demonstrated authenticity in pursuing his career (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006), because filmmaking is his passion. Martin argues about the importance of the 'knowing whom' competency if one wants to succeed in cinema acting as a career barrier that until today has prevented him making a film for the big screen (Inkson et al, 2012; Arthur et al, 2017). This realisation led Martin to enter academia:

Obviously, you realise that you cannot enter the clique. During that period, I was already doing projects for television, for more than a decade. I just could not enter the cinema clique. So, you don't feel like the dream is gone; it's just a realisation of how things work. I moved into academia because I needed to support my family. I realised that the market was declining, and I made the choice to opt for a new career. Up until now, I have kept

my own projects, which keeps me going. I am happy, the work is flexible, and this is helpful. It is a sort of balance. I am not entirely balanced. It's good that I can work with projects that I like – the university gives me the freedom to do my projects while being paid – it helps me develop. I'm offered the opportunity to do what I like. I'm pleased to have taken some of my students to a film festival in Greece. This helps me look good at work, and students like it. It helps me network at the festival. I create relationships with the organisers and participants and it opens doors. The university takes advantage of you, in a good way, but it's mutual. I make the films, wherever I choose to, I take them to different festivals and I take students with me to work as volunteers. Once, I spoke to the Dean, and he said, 'I don't care what you do as long as your independent work promotes you and the department'. That was clear enough for me.

A culmination of events, such as the deterioration of the structural market of filmmaking, led Martin into academia (Giddens, 1979). His career has evolved over time and, although academia was not his dream job, Martin is satisfied with his job, because he gets the chance to work on his film projects when teaching finishes. This gives him the freedom to work with his passion, spend time abroad, where he develops his 'knowing whom' competency, and freedom to change the boundaries of his job by adding interesting tasks (i.e. job-crafting – Berg et al., 2010). Martin values the freedom, the work-life balance, and the support academia gives him to pursue his passion. Hence, his career choice emphasises the relevance of creating one's career to suit one's circumstances (Hall, 2004).

Amelia (early 40s, lecturer, performing arts, single)

Amelia's career within arts started during university. However, she always loved to dance. She started dancing at the age of six and, since then, dancing has always been her passion. At college, her family did not encourage her to take up dancing professionally. She was advised to follow a 'proper' career within architecture, which she initially did:

I went to university and enrolled on the architecture course. I completed the first year, but I was very disappointed. I realised, while in the first year of university, that I was very far from what I wanted to do. The dream, since I was a child, was to dance. I remember in one of the tutorials, we had to wear a mask and do an experiment with cement. I freaked out. I thought

‘what am I doing with my life? I cannot do this’. I left the architecture course and searched for a course in dancing. When I found it and I managed to enrol, I thought that the door to heaven opened for me.’

For Amelia, being able to study dance, obtain a PhD in dance, and teach at the university is a blessing. She is passionate about her art and, in that sense, she is authentic to her passion and loyal to her dream (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). When reflecting upon her academic career, Amelia said:

Academia is an opportunity to develop, to get more knowledge, to have a permanent wage. It’s a safety. Certainly, the permanent wage and the whole system is an incentive. It’s important, a necessity for me, to work in an environment where I can do research. I think that this is my main motivation. Research is the thing that makes a job in academia interesting, or desirable. For the first three years, I was teaching six units per semester. It was hard work but I was dedicated and wanted to improve my practice. They gave me six new units to teach and I didn’t even get the slides from the previous tutors, I did everything from scratch because I wanted to develop the students, not simply teach them. I put everything into my work. This year, I told myself that I would decline requests from colleagues, because I need to balance myself. I am seriously tired.

Although Amelia has followed her dream and is eager to instil her passion and the benefits of dancing to everyone (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006), this has come at a price:

I’ve always faced a dilemma: should I remain loyal to my passion – dancing - or should I follow my heart, and move abroad, where I can have a better social life and be happy? This is my constant dilemma. I love dancing...I believe in it. I believe that we can do many things with dance. I believe its benefits are still underexplored. However, my choice to be a dancer has lead me to make hard career decisions. I had to choose between two countries. Where do I live? For me, this is a great dilemma. Although the art of dancing is holy to me, there are times when I say, ‘OK. I can’t do this any longer. I need to leave. I will give it up and do something else’. There are moments that make you think about these intense moments.

Amelia has paid a price for being authentic. She is unbalanced in her work-life context and is constantly faced with the dilemma of following her passion or living a life that may be more joyful, based on relationships with others (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). The kaleidoscope career argues that people are constantly concerned with three main needs, regarding career development: authenticity, balance, and challenge. These needs move into the foreground and background of people's lives, increasing and decreasing in intensity depending on the circumstances in their lives. Amelia is constantly battling with the decision whether to leave academia and pursue her need for balance and relationships (Gilligan, 1982).

Discussion

The stories relayed here are from four UK academics. All four are at different levels of the hierarchy (lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor), each with their own interesting career stories. The complexity of decisions and aspects in creating an academic career is emphasised in all narratives. The life stories of the academics, support different career constructs such as the protean, intelligent, boundaryless and kaleidoscope career. For instance, the protean career is supported by the need to move into academia by morphing their career path accordingly (Hall, 2004). Moreover, the need to satisfy their need for authenticity was also met by this career move, because participants chose to enter the profession because of the research opportunities the sector provides. Research is their passion, because it provides challenge and intellectual stimulation (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006).

While these career models emphasise the elimination of boundaries (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004), one must not neglect the impact of structural elements on careerists' agency (Giddens, 1979). A major obstacle to career development may be the financial situation one is faced with. Hence, financial security becomes important (Baruch and Hall, 2004; Baruch, 2013) as academic careers are purported to be stable with high employment safety. This may limit the freedom of an entirely subjective career, obliging the individual to take up a position for financial protection, thereby obstructing the boundaryless career path (Inkson et al, 2012).

Interestingly, apart from Adam, who gets his identity from work, participants stressed that their careers are not their top priority; instead, their family and personal life come first. However, although academia is known for its working flexibility, which contributes towards work-life balance (Baruch and Hall, 2004), everyone's account emphasises work overload and imbalance. This chapter echoes previous findings regarding UK Higher Education, which argue that academics are stressed and struggling to find time for personal relationships and research (Bothwell, 2018; Knights and Richards, 2003). Indeed, many academics in the UK are part of 'Generation X', who are more interested in working to live, rather than the opposite (Sullivan et al., 2009). Despite the need for work-life balance, they are restrained by structural forces such as the hard reality of 'publish or perish' (Baruch and Hall, 2004). In addition, structural forces such as the importance of 'knowing whom' in their field, career barriers, and serendipity were also noted by participants as factors affecting their career evolution.

Conclusion

This chapter shares the narratives of four UK academics. Its aims to deepen understanding of the nature of academic careers by sharing life-stories, and by exploring enthusiasms and issues affecting academics (Baruch and Hall, 2004). Whilst every individual's story is different, common threads arise. The approach adopted has been qualitative in nature to uncover experiences through life stories. Future research could fruitfully explore a broader, multinational, study of academic careers, because this would potentially reveal differences arising from different national contexts. The concepts emerging from the study such as kaleidoscope, intelligent and protean career emphasise the importance of structure and agency (Giddens, 1979) in careers. The choices (agency) people make to follow their dream jobs is one part of the broader picture. The structural forces (such as the academic labour market, and the support from others in pursuing one's career) also affect career choices and paths. Consequently, career progression in academia is more about individuals making choices and managing routes, making the best of their circumstances at that time, rather than organisations structuring careers for their employees (Baruch, 2004).

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